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Vignettes in Qualitative Educational Research: Investigating Greek School Principals' Values


Pelagia A. Stravakou

Democritus University of Thrace, Alexandroupolis, pstravak@eled.duth.gr

Evangelia Ch. Lozgka

Democritus University of Thrace, Alexandroupolis, elozgka@eled.duth.gr

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Abstract

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Keywords

Vignettes, Qualitative Research, Methodology, Principals' Values

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Vignettes in Qualitative Educational Research: Investigating Greek School Principals' Values

Pelagia A. Stravakou and Evangelia Ch. Lozgka
Democritus University of Thrace, Alexandroupolis, Greece

Vignettes are hypothetical scenarios of many forms that are presented to interviewees in qualitative studies to elicit participants' answers on diverse topics. Although there are few scholars having discussed the application of vignettes in qualitative studies, there is no article assessing the implementation of vignettes in the field of educational administration. Therefore, our article discusses the vignette technique as a data collection tool within the qualitative methodological paradigm with a focus on the aforementioned field. More specifically, in the first section we outline the design of hypothetical scenarios and their advantages and disadvantages as a data gathering tool, according to the relevant literature. The rest of the article is an account of our findings, when we used vignettes with semi-structured interviews to investigate the Greek principals' value orientations. Findings suggested that answering to the stories was a very interesting and enjoyable process that made the principals talk without reservations. Furthermore, reflecting on their professional practice the participants were willing to share similar incidents from their experiences. One critical factor for vignettes to be effective is to be close to reality of respondents.

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Scientists from various fields of study such as education, psychology, and sociology have implemented the *vignette technique* for diverse research purposes (Simon & Tierney, 2011, p.2). More specifically, researchers have applied vignettes to collect data in studies with different methodology (Wilks, 2004, pp. 80-81), to analyze data gathered and subsequently, present the findings in studies with qualitative design (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p.70) and lately, to construct and assess questionnaires (Martin, 2006, p. 2).

But the versatility of the vignette technique, in association with the fact that the latter is often not included in the manuals of research methodology in social sciences, leads to ambiguity and hinders its usage by aspiring researchers¹.

More recently, few writers (see Barter & Renold, 1999, 2000; Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, & Herber, 2014; Hughes, 1998; Hughes & Huby, 2004; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000; Wilson & While, 1998) have discussed the methodological issues arising when vignettes are used to gather data, especially in qualitative studies, but none of these papers have focused on the educational domain in particular. Furthermore, some of the above writers such as Barter and Renold (2000, p. 308), Schoenberg and Ravdal (2000, p. 63) and more recently Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014, p. 427) have highlighted that there is still a need for more scientific articles exploring how vignettes are constructed and implemented as inquiring tools.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to this growing area of research about the evaluation of vignettes as a methodological data collection tool by investigating the Greek school principals' values in primary education. For that reason, we first examine briefly how vignettes are designed and administered to research participants in qualitative research, and we also outline the advantages and the weaknesses associated with the usage of this technique,

¹ Exceptions are Bloor and Wood's (2006, pp. 183-184) and Miles and Huberman's (1994, pp. 81-83) references to vignettes as a data collection tool, although the latter scholars have suggested a different implementation of vignettes to one which we discuss in this paper.

according to the literature. Then, we present our findings of the application of vignettes in principals' values. Finally, we draw the conclusions from the usage of vignettes in our specific study.

The Technique of Vignettes

Clarification and Construction

A broad and frequently used in the literature definition of vignettes has been proposed by Finch (1987, p. 105) who stated that "vignettes are short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond." On the other hand, Jeffries and Maeder (2004-2005, p. 18) have more narrowly defined vignettes as "incomplete short stories that are written to reflect, in a less complex way, real-life situations in order to encourage discussions and potential solutions to problems where multiple solutions are possible," a definition which seems to fit in our case for investigating the values in the second part.

Researchers can obtain the information to create the context of the stories either from their own or participants' experience, by reviewing what other scientists have found about the topic under study, and from preliminary studies (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014, pp. 431-432; Hughes & Huby, 2004, pp. 37-38). As mentioned by Ulrich and Ratcliffe (2007, pp. 165-166), "focus group" is an effective method to be used in preliminary studies for investigators to design the stories, when there is no substantial theory about the issue under investigation. Once the scenarios are completed, they typically involve respondents in a dilemma, where participants have to take a moral stance, or respondents have to judge, or make a specific decision (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 184).

The two other issues which have to be considered for the construction of hypothetical scenarios² are the details in the stories and their length. The quantity of details is associated with the research design because the provision of less information in hypothetical scenarios favors the personal elements of participants to come to the surface, matching in a qualitative research design. Conversely, specific details have to be included in quantitative approaches where causal relationships are sought (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 310; Finch, 1987, pp. 106-112; Martin, 2006, p. 2). Stecher et al. (2006, pp. 120-121) also underlined that with more information in vignettes, there is a risk for extended and complicated stories for those who will have to answer them, and in that case the stories may lack realism and relevancy, too. However, for being easily grasped by participants vignettes should have enough information (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 183), and investigators should pay particular attention to the simplicity of the scenarios when kids participate in studies (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 314).

As for the length of scenarios, the review of the relevant literature revealed that there is little agreement among the scholars. Even though Jeffries and Maeder (2011, p. 163) set the cap of two hundred words on hypothetical scenarios, in practice the size varies and is related to whether an only vignette is used unfurling as the research process moves or if there are many static scenarios. For example, Hughes (1998, p. 388) used an evolving vignette consisted of one thousand words. "Snapshot" stories of a paragraph or covering a page have been constructed elsewhere (Nygren & Olstedal, 2015, p. 6; Roche, 1997, pp. 96-99), whereas Finch (1987, p. 107) claimed that a scenario may be extended even to a few words.

Turning now to the amount of hypothetical stories, this has also differed in the literature, but the number of the stories is associated with specific advantages and

² Throughout this paper, we use the term scenario/s to refer to the context of vignettes and not to the technique of scenarios, as Jeffries and Maeder (2011, pp. 163-164) have argued that scenarios and vignettes are not the same. Similarly, we use the term story/ies.

disadvantages. Researchers having implemented the technique concluded that people can deal with the stories until 120 min. (Soydan, 1996, p. 126). Bloor and Wood (2006, p. 183) also observed that in qualitative studies, in conjunction with the interview's tool, the amount of scenarios ranges from four to six, although researchers in this case cannot investigate many issues due to the small number of stories.

The two kinds of scenarios mentioned above, namely the "developmental" (Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010, p. 175) and the "snapshot," are two alternative ways for investigators to present vignettes to participants of a study, in relation to the structure of the stories (Nygren & Oltedal, 2015, p. 6). In the first type, researchers use a vignette showed partially and ask participants' opinion about each part of it or about the sequence of scenario, as the latter is enriched with new information being more complicated (Finch, 1987, p. 106-109; Jenkins et al., 2010, p. 176). On the contrary, in snapshot-vignettes scenarios are smaller and are independent of each other, presenting an individual, a situation or an event (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010, p. 128), without any changes in their context. Hughes (1998, p. 388) pointed out that using stories that are not static is not time-consuming and there are fewer possibilities for respondents to get bored, whereas Finch (1987, p. 109) drew attention to the quantity of variations in vignettes that are developed, because more than three are problematic. Moreover, the vocabulary is another important factor in the formulation of scenarios that should be adjusted each time to participants' different culture, in case that people from various professions or societies participate in the study (Al Sadi & Basit, 2017, p. 184, Wilson & While, 1998, p. 82).

Hypothetical scenarios can be of many types such as videos, photos, films, music, cards, and even comics. Computer programs are an alternative for researchers to depict the scenarios, too (Hughes, 1998, p. 382; Ulrich & Ratcliffe, 2007, p. 165). But two drawbacks of the scenarios in a video format are that their quality is determined by how well the actors in them pretend and that they are expensive to be constructed. Instead, it has been noted that video vignettes present with more authenticity the situation in a scenario and tackle the potential literacy problems, accompanying the reading of stories by participants themselves (Simon & Tierney, 2011, p. 7). However, the latter will not be a problem in research using text vignettes, if investigators take into consideration Hughes's (1998, p. 388) suggestion and read the stories to the participants who do not have literacy skills. On the other hand, cartoons are an appropriate and most attractive stimulus when kids have to respond in the study (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017, p. 103) and photos for the investigation of complex issues (Hughes & Huby, 2004, p. 39), as Louari (2014, pp. 99-106) did in her dissertation in Greece, where she used vignettes, among other tools, in the form of images to assess what the pupils knew about "disability."

In general, either other tools and methods may be used together with hypothetical scenarios in research or the stories may be implemented alone (Barter & Renold, 1999 para. 1). But especially in qualitative research designs, vignettes are usually applied with interviews of various types and with open questions (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 183; Hughes & Huby, 2004, p. 42).

What Questions Are Posed in Vignettes?

The questions accompanying scenarios are diverse and pertain to the issue being studied. So, researchers can request participants to answer about their own reaction to the depicted scenario, about hypothetical protagonist's decision to act, or how the heroes should act (Barter & Renold, 1999, para. 1). Answering from another's point of view makes people feel more comfortable revealing their true opinions and is a painless way of collecting personal data (Jenkins et al., 2010, pp. 181-182). On the contrary, it has been argued that it may lead to

erroneous data, because the participants' reaction may not be consistent with that proposed for someone else (Hughes, 1998, p. 385). With specific regard to the investigation of values, Minkov (2013, pp. 42-55) stated that the "should-do" questions reveal what participants want from other people to do ("desirable values"), personal value orientations are unraveled by questions about what is of significance for oneself, whereas the "would-do" questions capture how people intend to behave. Still, participants after reading the scenarios may have to categorize and evaluate vignettes (Martin, 2006, p. 2), or to "think aloud" when they give their responses (Hughes & Huby, 2004, pp. 39-40).

Benefits of the Vignette Technique

Previous research has indicated that vignette technique is an important tool for exploring in a painless way complex issues, which are not easy either for investigators to ask or for respondents to answer (Barter & Renold, 2000, pp. 318-319; Hughes, 1998, p. 383), and it can also bring to light research findings related to vague subjects (Goss, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, vignettes are an effective technique for the study of value orientations, attitudes, behavioral norms, and about what people think (Finch, 1987, pp. 105-106).

Particularly in a qualitative approach, hypothetical scenarios facilitate the investigation of how people operate without the ethical challenges and the hazard in reliability and validity often encountered by observers (Gould, 1996, pp. 209-210). In addition, they allow participants to have power in the research process because their own important understandings are unraveled (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 319; Finch, 1987, p. 112). Roche (1997) found that his hypothetical stories provoked the retraction of similar personal experiences from the memory of the individuals and helped the respondents to better comprehend what was asked in the research process. Elsewhere, the application of stories sparked participants' interest to seek further information, after the research, for concepts contained therein, and contributed to the better understanding of these terms (Al Sadi & Basit, 2017, pp. 192-193). It seems that the format of scenarios and the process of the technique promote the active involvement of people, who do not stand passively. In fact, other studies have indicated that participants find vignettes a fun and an enjoyable process and are zealous to participate in research (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000; Stecher et al., 2006, p. 121). Indeed, more reliable and valid research data can be collected when people speak with more details and get engaged energetically in research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 178). As Dixon, Murray, and Daiches (2012, p. 85) note, these positive aspects are very significant especially when the sample of the study consists of children. Furthermore, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014, pp. 427-428) stated that by the usage of this technique the chances for unpleasant consequences of child participation in surveys are decreased. But this paper assumes that the most important advantage of scenarios is their flexibility, because vignettes offer researchers the possibility to adapt them to their specific research purposes and their respective sample, to use vignettes along with various methods and techniques, in triangulation, individually and collectively. Hypothetical stories also help issues not directly related to the subject being studied not to be investigated (O'Brien, 2011, p. 269).

Limitations of Vignettes

Despite the multiple advantages, there are some difficulties with vignettes, as in all research techniques and methods.

The main limitation emphasized by many researchers is the inconsistency between respondents' true behavior and what the data of vignettes reveal (Nygren & Oltedal, 2015, p. 11; Ulrich & Ratcliffe, 2007, p. 176). Actually, there have been research findings confirming the above justification and others contradicting it, without being a unanimous answer (Barter

& Renold, 1999, para. 1). But as Hughes and Huby (2004, p. 47) underlined, the real world cannot be fully recorded by the use of any tool and method. Furthermore, commenting on the investigation of values with the use of vignettes in qualitative research, Wilks (2004, p. 83) argued that prognosticating people's behavior is not the case, because the attention is turned to the understandings of people for the circumstances, leading to an explanation of their actions and of their behavior.

An additional danger threatening the honesty of participants' responses in vignettes is the need for people to give socially acceptable answers. In order to tackle this problem, researchers are advised to provoke first answers for the hero's reaction in scenarios and then for the reaction of research participants (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 312). However, for Hofstede (1980, pp. 21-22) "social desirability" is not a risk, in reality is what researchers look for when exploring the values that Hofstede called "desirable" being "what people think ought to be desired," which we will mention further below.

Problem can also occur if many stories are designed, meaning more respondents' involvement and consequently, their boredom or "satisficing," due to the fact that participants will have little time to work with the stories (Hughes & Huby, 2004, pp. 40-41). Schoenberg and Ravdal (2000, p. 70) have added in difficulties the reluctance of some people to answer, either because they do not know much about the subject of scenarios or because they have no confidence in their arguments.

Lastly, conducting a qualitative educational research using vignettes in conjunction with semi-structured interviews entails that the researcher has to take into consideration the codes of ethics in social and educational research (see for example Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 79-116), concerning his/her specific research purpose and the sample of the study. However, when it comes to hypothetical scenarios that are constructed from previous research data, extreme attention must be paid in order for confidentiality to be ensured and for participants to be kept anonymous. Therefore, any identifiers should be removed and substituted with false information being appropriate for respondents (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014, pp. 432-435). For the above reasons, it has also been proposed that a scenario can be a combination of multiple data obtained from different respondents, without any alternation to participants' initial points of view (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014, pp. 432-433). Jenkins et al. (2010, pp. 181-182) also highlighted the need for respondents' protection by being aware both of the researcher's handling of the findings and of the delicate information, and of the expectations of the vignette process, because respondents are more comfortable with answering to vignettes by responding about the hero in the stories, in comparison with traditional interviews, and consequently, people may expose more personal information to the interviewer. From our experience with vignettes, we recommend that this protection can be ensured by the member checking process, where the participants, after reading what they have said, can agree upon the personal information which are publishable and the researcher has respondents' approval to proceed with the process. By that way, "the respect of personal life" (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 97-98) is protected and participants will not feel betrayed.

Overall, the drawbacks of this technique are much fewer than the benefits in the field of education (Simon & Tierney, 2011, p. 6), as it can be deduced from above sub-chapters.

Investigating Greek School Principals' Values Using the Technique of Vignettes

The main purpose of our primary study, where vignettes were used, was to examine school principals' values in primary education in Greece. This issue was particularly interesting for investigation, as previous research findings have indicated that administrative work in the educational field is catalytically affected by the values (see for example Begley, 2000, pp. 242-244) and original for Greece, due to the lack of relevant studies.

A qualitative approach was employed because our main concern was to gain insights into the subjective perceptions and experiences of principals and because there is no general agreement among scholars on values in the aforementioned field (Begley, 2000, p. 245; Creswell, 2011). Besides, pioneers in the investigation of values in the educational administration have suggested the qualitative example, as the most suitable (Begley, 2000, p. 242).

We inspired the structure of our research by Kasten and Ashbaugh's (1991) study and our research questions were: (a) What are the school principals' values in primary education in Greece, (b) what are the factors that Greek principals consider to influence their values, and (c) how do participants understand the importance of values in educational administration? So in order to answer the above questions, we applied semi-structured interviews with open questions, which allow the values of respondents and their personal experiences in more detail to be unraveled, while this method is also characterized by adaptability. Researchers can clarify more the phenomenon under study in this type of interview through prompts, too (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 451-469). However, because many times the values that individuals truly embrace can be different from those mentioned in their words (Schein, 2004, pp. 29-30), it was considered appropriate to examine principals' values both directly and indirectly.

Hence, we were looking for a suitable technique to facilitate the examination of the difficult issue of values, since as noted by Ribbins (1999, p. xiv) "the word 'values' finesses all the tough questions," in an indirect manner and in association with the semi-structured interviews, whereas the participants in this first phase would not have been aware of the definition of the term. For those reasons, the technique of vignettes was chosen in line with other similar studies (e.g., Law, Walker, & Dimmock, 2003) to serve our purposes.

Construction of Vignettes and Their Characteristics

Campbell (1996, p. 4) maintained that for designing scenarios, researchers have to define the matters to be studied, they have to construct scenarios with pertinence and plausibility, and the stories should also be evaluated in a pilot study with people similar to participants.

Therefore, we clarified the concept of values using Kluckhohn's definition, according to which "values are a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action" (Begley, 2000, p. 235). This term allowed us to find the values when principals chose among alternatives in the decision process (Begley, 2000, p. 235). It is interesting that the definitions of vignettes and values in our case fit very well together, because in both the principals had to select among different choices (Jeffries & Maeder, 2004-2005, p. 20). Then, our goal was to describe in the hypothetical stories situations that Greek principals face during their administrative work and in which they have to come to a decision, where there is a collision of values. We selected the decision-making process because it penetrates all the administrative functions. However, apart from the above definition of values, the term was further divided according to the discrimination proposed by Hofstede in order for values more precisely to be examined. Hofstede separated values into "desired" and "desirable," where the former are the value orientations of individuals at a personal level, whereas the latter are related to what a person thinks significant for others. On the basis of the above-mentioned differentiation, researchers have to ask participants questions of "how people should or ought to behave" to solicit their views about the values called desirable, while what is of significance for respondents is an appropriate question for their personal values (Hofstede, 1980, pp. 21-22, Minkov, 2013, pp. 40-55). This different terminology helped us form the questions following

the vignettes to collect the principals' personal values and by the desirable values the norms of their professional group that can be considered part of their professional culture.

The Greek educational system is characterized by centralization and school principals are responsible for decisions concerning the operation of schools due to the fact that they are at the lowest level of the pyramid in administration (Maragkoudaki, 2008, pp. 205-206). Also, in Greece, according to the relevant legislation, all schoolteachers who constitute the Teachers' Associations³, participate as a collective body with principal and deputy principal to the school administration and together make decisions (Ypourgiki Apofasi F.353.1/324/105657/D1, Kefalaio D', arthro 28, §2.g & arthro 29, 2002). Furthermore, in the educational sector, depending on the difficulty level, decisions can be either unplanned that is unexpected or planned that is expected and not so difficult (Pasiardis, 2004, p. 179).

Taking into consideration all of the above as the theoretical framework, our goal was to design vignettes about both planned and unanticipated issues involving different people (e.g., students, teachers, etc.) in which the principals had to decide as they do in their daily administrative educational practice.

In addition, the technical characteristics of the vignettes were:

- to have written form and be snapshots because of the limited cost and time,
- that the vignettes should not exceed the 200 words and not have an end because this would be determined by the respondents' decisions, where their values would be arisen (Campbell, 1996, p. 4; Jeffries & Maeder, 2004-2005, p. 20),
- to be understandable by the principals and simultaneously not clearly defined, so that the stories with the following open-ended questions could bring forth the principals' values without the influence of the researchers (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 310),
- the language used to reflect participants' culture (Hughes, 1998, p. 389) and
- to be short, so that the principals would not lose their interest.

Before conducting the main research, we carried out a pilot study of vignettes to confirm that the hypothetical scenarios were realistic, and the following questions were appropriate for the principals. In the pilot-research, two principals participated not being in the main sample and the vignettes were also tested by two academics for their suitability, enhancing with that way the credibility of the stories, according to Flaskerud (Gould, 1996, p. 210). The vignettes with the following questions can be found in the Appendix.

The Administration of Vignettes

After the testing of the hypothetical scenarios, minor adjustments were made. More specifically, we improved the syntax of some sentences in two vignettes changed to be more easily readable by the principals. Finally, after having informed the respondents about the purposes of our study and the estimated time the principals would need to spend, we continued with the main process. The voluntary participation of the participants in the research process was also ensured and they were aware of the fact that they could leave the study at any time (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 81-101), because the assurance of the ethical principles in research is of paramount importance, regardless of the advantage of the vignette technique to investigate tough issues (Jenkins et al., 2010, pp. 181-182). The main survey involved 12 principals, six

³ Although there have been proposed many phrases such as Teachers' Team, Board, Unit or Association, in this article we use the latter to mean all the teachers in a school unit.

men and six women, with different years in the principal's position selected by the "homogeneous sampling" (Creswell, 2011, p. 246). For better identifying the principals with the character of vignettes, it was considered more appropriate the participants' gender to be matched with the gender of the protagonist in the scenarios, whenever a principal presented (Jenkins et al., 2010, p. 177).

As for the process, each story was introduced separately and the principals were requested to read the scenario, then to take a little time to comprehend the story before answering the questions. An interesting point was when, after the completion of the interviews, we asked principals whether they wanted to send them via e-mail their transcribed material, so that they could check them for authenticity and for possible identifiers in order for the credibility of the obtained data to be enhanced, as Mason (2003, pp. 340-344) suggested. The participants seemed to appreciate this practice a lot which was observed from their countenances. All of them wanted to read what was said in our meetings with eagerness and curiosity and they sent us quickly their positive answers, so that we could proceed with the analysis. The participants' confirmation proved significant to realize the interviewees that the researchers undertook the research seriously and understood their responsibilities. Unexpectedly, one female principal after reading the transcription wrote in the follow up message "I also learn from you," meaning that participants can reflect to their answers and also echoed back to Koelsch's (2013, p. 171) conclusion that "the member check...has also been used as means of equalizing power relationships within the research relationship by enlisting participants as members of the research team."

Having discussed how we constructed the vignettes, we present in the final section the major Findings emerging from the application of the technique in our study.

Findings and Discussion

Vignettes Made Participants Open Up

Barter and Renold (1999, "Ice breaker") highlighted the positive effects of using hypothetical scenarios early in the research process, as the stories can be "ice breakers." Although this was not the reason for our using the scenarios at the first stage of the research prior to direct questions, but our intention to investigate the values in a non-direct manner, this choice let principals open up and talk more while the process was proceeding. The principals' openness was revealed not only from the interviewees' comments made in the subsequent vignettes, but also from their body language and their nonverbal behavior. More specifically, in the first minutes of the interviews many of them were a bit confused and reluctant to speak about values and wanted to know what exactly we meant by this term, as they said they had an intuitive perception of it. This hesitation reminded us both Ribbins's (1999, p. xiv) words that values are not expressed with comfort by people, and research findings having concluded that the description in the context of vignettes allows people who have no acquaintance with the research topic to respond (Al Sadi & Basit, 2017, p. 184). However, when the principals started to deal with the stories, a remarkable difference in their attitudes and a great interest to solve the issue mentioned in the scenarios were observed. Their interest was also confirmed by the transcribed text of their responses to vignettes which gave us on average threefold material, in comparison to the direct questions of the second phase. Other researchers having implemented this technique have also emphasized the eagerness of participants to respond to the stories and the high involvement of people in them (e.g., Barter & Renold, 2000, pp. 315-318; Finch, 1987, p. 109; Hughes, 1998, p. 391; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000; Stecher et al., 2006, p. 43).

Particularly after the first scenario, most of the principals began to comment on some points of the vignettes before the questions following the scenarios were even posed. In

accordance with Jenkins et al. (2010, p. 186), we believe that the interest and the willingness of respondents to speak in vignettes may be associated not only to the technique itself, but also because the situations in the stories were similar to real situations the principals have to face in their daily professional work, which is further discussed below. Hence, the interview was often like a conversation between the participants and the researchers, and it can be concluded that when the interview is implemented with the vignette technique, the latter could mitigate the weaknesses of the former (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 313).

Furthermore, at the beginning of the vignette process the interviewers⁴, who are also the authors of this study, informed the participants that they wanted to know what the principals truly think about the situations in scenarios and that they weren't looking for appropriate or correct replies (Hughes & Huby, 2004, p. 45). That was a critical point as it can be concluded from the following reaction of one participant, when we gave her instructions:

Researcher: [...] You are asked to read each story as many times as you think it is necessary to understand the situation. Then, we will ask you some questions. There are no appropriate or correct answers.

Participant 8: Oh, alright...coz you know...you know that maybe my answers won't be correct, I don't know.

Researcher: No, you don't have to worry because we are not looking for correct answers, nor are we going to evaluate your responses. We are only interested in what you truly think.

When the usage of vignettes aims to elicit peoples' beliefs, opinions and their individual thoughts, interviewers have to set in advance that answering to vignettes is not an assessment of interviewees' knowledge for participants to be encouraged to speak without reservations. Having acknowledged potential difficulties such as a doubt in responding, Schoenberg and Ravdal (2000, p. 70) have also proposed as a solution the boosting of participants' confidence and respondents' support given by the person conducting the research. Although the above participant may have had a hesitation at first, when she started to read the stories and realized that the incidents in them were very close to her professional reality, she had no difficulty in answering the questions. This brings us back to the point that hypothetical scenarios should resemble real incidents.

Vignettes Should Be Close to Reality

It has also been emphasized in the literature that if the investigators' intention is to obtain data for real circumstances, vignettes should be constructed from real facts for greater credibility of the qualitative research (Martin, 2006, p. 2). Consequently, there are more possibilities for lifelike answers and greater involvement of people in the research process (Barter & Renold, 2000, pp. 319-320; Hughes & Huby, 2004, pp. 37-41; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000, p. 67). In fact, that was the case in our study because our intention was to examine the principals' working values, while they decided on problematical situations. Therefore, for the authenticity of our stories the preliminary research, where two principals were asked to refer easy and difficult decisions they had to take during their tenure, the people involved in these decisions and also to think about specific events from their experience, was turned out to be essential.

⁴During the interview process one of the interviewers asked the questions and the other took notes.

The interviewees' comments while reading the vignettes confirmed the plausibility of the scenarios. Actually, in most of the vignettes, almost all of the participants took occasion of the issue described in the scenario to stress that the described situations were very common in Greek school units with quite a lot of teachers working in. The principals in our sample had had experience in handling similar incidents and situations during their tenure with parents protesting because of the law grades (as in the second vignette) or children misbehaving (as in the third vignette). For instance, after reading the first vignette, describing teachers' dissatisfaction for the schedule of supervision in the schoolyard, two principals explained that the distribution of duties to educators in a big school was very difficult due to the large number of teachers, and consequently, there were always educators who felt dissatisfied or annoyed by the principals' decisions to apportion the tasks. It seemed that the events in the stories reflected the "scenes" of the daily principals' professional lives while they exercised the administrative functions.

The close resemblance between our hypothetical scenarios and the administrative reality in Greek schools is evident in the excerpt below, where a male participant spontaneously commented:

Participant 4: You said at the beginning of the process that the vignettes would be hypothetical. Basically, I want to tell you that the scenarios you have chosen are very close to reality. Namely, there aren't hypothetical. There are incidents I have faced during my thirty years of experience, having not only here but also in other school units... So, they happen in the educational sector. Principals and teachers face them.

Generally, for the first three vignettes, 10 of the 12 principals mentioned that the situations described were very common and were considered to be expected. This conclusion further strengthened the classification of the issues in scenarios we had made into more (vignettes 1-3) and less planned (vignettes 4-6) problems. On the contrary, the other two of the principals hadn't faced some problematical situations under the category "planned," but they did not seem to have difficulties in giving their answers. As Jenkins et al. (2010, p. 188) put it, it is very difficult for all the scenarios to match with the reality of every one of the respondents because "individuals' experiences are inherently unique and diverse phenomena."

For more credibility in the construction of the stories, Flakerud added the evaluation of scenarios by people with deep knowledge of the subject being studied in the stories, apart from the piloting and the contribution of the literature to the design (Gould, 1996, p. 210). Indeed, our conversations both with academics and practicing principals helped us categorize the sixth vignette, describing a teacher who told the principal about her suspicions of two children having been victims of domestic violence. There is legislation ordaining how the Greek principals' ought to handle these situations, so this issue could be a planned problem. However, from our conversations it was emerged that due to the seriousness and the complexity of the matter many principals do not usually follow the law. Hence, we put it in unplanned problems. Actually, our decision was validated by the interviewees. Specifically, a female principal highlighted that the hazard posed to principals' life by the dangerous behavior of the parents abusing their children discourages some principals from reporting the fact of the domestic violence, as they should do. She characteristically said:

Participant 6: You know this is very difficult. If the father does not cooperate... and he doesn't cooperate because he beats his child having bruises, you will be afraid of your physical safety. This father may come and harm you because you blurt out what happens to the family. There are a lot [of principals] who...and I

don't judge them. If they think that the father is dangerous, when he comes, you see by the way he speaks and treats you, you will say why to get involved...you will say I let the issue, I let him do whatever he wants, the child will go to the middle school and the same things will happen.

From our experience, we strongly agree that preliminary data and information gathered prior to the construction of vignettes from discussions with people who are the same as the participants are valuable to enhance the credibility of the research and can contribute to the designing of more life-like stories.

In our view, another benefit when vignettes are constructed from preliminary studies is that interviewers feel more confident becoming acquainted with the research topic and with what happens in participants' life (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 470; Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 81). This knowledge will later help investigators to delve more into interviewees' responses and check their initial answers (Hughes, 1998, p. 390). For example, in the preparatory interviewees for the design of the scenarios with two principals, one of them explained to us that there is often a different treatment in school units between the older educators and the newer in the work, because the former think they should have more rights and fewer responsibilities. He said that the above discrimination could happen for the hours of supervision in the schoolyard or for the distribution of classes or for the extra duties, like the national celebrations. This helped us do the appropriate probes as the following dialogue indicates for the first story:

Researcher: What should a principal in the Greek educational system do in that case?

Participant 8: The same that this principal requested from the Deputy Principal. All teachers should supervise the children equally and fairly. The younger [educators] shouldn't do more supervision because they are younger. The older shouldn't have such a demand because they have more years of experience either.

Researcher: Does this occur with the distribution of classes?

Participant 8: When I first came in this school as a principal, I found that. Namely the older educators start to choose classes. I don't think this is fair, but all the teachers have accepted it. There is no problem, so I don't think that I should "shuffle the cards" and provoke problems. Since they have had it for many years and there is no problem, I left it as such. But as for the supervision, I would have assigned it equally.

Moreover, our conversations with the principals who tested the scenarios facilitated our probes to be more accurate where the information in the vignettes was indefinite. Barter and Renold (2000, p. 310) stated that the fewer information contained in scenarios is a determinant for peoples' subjective responses coming to the front. Conversely, according to Hughes (1998, pp. 391-392), negative feelings may be provoked to people when the stories are not clearly defined, although in our study only Barter and Renold's previous comment about the fewer information in the scenarios was confirmed. The lack of details in the scenarios in conjunction with our probing allowed the parameters of the principals' decisions, their priorities and their intermediate thoughts having while deciding to be revealed.

Despite the lack of information in the stories, in general the vignettes let the plurality of participants' subjective meanings to surface. This positive function of hypothetical scenarios in qualitative designs has also been emphasized by other researchers (Barter & Renold, 2000, p. 309; Finch, 1987, p. 112) and it is illustrated in the quotes below:

Participant 3: This is exactly the same situation as in our school. This is how we operate... At first there were colleagues who posed their objections for the efficiency, but I told them that if we measured the time...in essence the whole process would be three to four minutes.

Participant 5: We do that [teachers gather their students after each recess to go them with safety to classrooms] because it protects us. And anyway, I don't agree with that. I let's say have a suggestion, a solution for something that I suggest, but I don't consider it appropriate to be the first to speak or to impose my decision.

It is evident that the same context of the stories provoked different points of view between the two participants. The participant 3 did not disapprove the announcement of the principal's decision in the vignette 5 because, as he later explained, for him priority was the safety of children. By contrast, the fifth participant objected to the way the principal in the scenario took the decision on her own, because for her the participatory decision-making was of most significance. This diversity of the participants' opinions and their subsequently justifications made apparent the discrepancies in their values and preferable practices.

Hence, the vignettes finally served our purpose to study the principals' value orientations in an indirect way, before the announcement of the definition of values to the participants.

Vignettes Revive Similar Experiences from the Participants' Memories

Another feature of hypothetical scenarios mentioned in the literature is that when people answer to scenarios, they share with researchers' analogous incidents and events from their life or they draw a parallel between what is described in the story and their own true stories (Hughes, 1998, p. 383; Roche, 1997, p. 269). In our study many respondents based on the issues described in the scenarios referred to the ways they had handled similar problems and dilemmas. The lifelike vignettes served as a basis for the principals to reflect on their own professional practices, too. This can be seen in the following quote from an answer to the first scenario:

Participant 2: And in our school if you see our schedule of the supervision is per hours, namely we apportion the minutes. The younger teachers maybe have five to 10 minutes per week more than the older, but we don't talk about a big discrepancy.

Or another male principal while answering the fourth vignette about a child's accident happened in the schoolyard said:

Participant 3: This child [in the scenario] got injured, it just happened. I had been a child two or three times to the hospital. In any of these three times parents didn't behave like this [like the parents in the scenario]. Instead, parents thanked me because I had been to the hospital.

Despite the similarities, the last extract also shows a difference between the depicting situation in the scenario and what the participant 3 had experienced. Although this male principal had handled similar serious children's accidents during his tenure and had been with the injured children to the hospital, the ending of "his stories" was not the same as in the scenario. Unlike with the parents' angry complaints about the child's accident in the vignette, in the cases of the participant 3 the parents were very grateful for this principal's handling of the incident. According to Jenkins et al. (2010, pp. 188-189) such a discrepancy will not be a problem if respondents know at the beginning of the interview this possibility.

Furthermore, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014, pp. 436-437) noticed in their study the phenomenon of their respondents' much and open talk about their personal stories, while the researchers also emphasized the cautious handlings that they had made in order for the discussion to return back to the research topic. That exactly occurred in our implementation of the technique. Each and every principal responding to the stories remembered similar incidents and personal events from his/her work and spontaneously told them to us. The issues were diverse such as an educator's objection toward the principal's decision about children's safety, specific students' accidents or incidents, teachers' complaints about the schedules etc.

However, some of the principals had more than one event to mention and they often analyzed the incidents a lot, getting off the research question. Then, it was our responsibility to return them gently to the discussion about the research objectives. Of course, the real examples that the participants drew on from their experiences were not irrelevant at all. In fact, these similar occurrences added richness and depth in the study.

Also, a principal, occasioned by the critical incident of the accident in the fourth vignette, opened the diary of school life, in which events about the school function are written, and read to us some of them. More specifically, he mentioned parents' complaints about a teacher and a parent's threats to the school staff due to the fact that a student, according to him, used to bother his child. After the description of the incidents, the principal also read to us his judgments about these events and his practices to tackle these problems. He characteristically said, "Here is a handling of such an incident having occurred, here I am describing to you." Such severe incidents having been recorded in the diary of the school life which is an official document maybe would not have been so easily revealed by the principal if the traditional interviewing had been used in the research.

Moreover, in the fieldwork, we were present at conversations between one of the principals and a teacher talking about a recent child's accident, similar to the one in our fourth scenario, which had been handled in the same manner with that proposed by the same principal in the interview. Of course, it is well mentioned in the literature that is unknown whether the way the principals reacted to the stories is in congruence with the way they choose to act in reality (Barter & Renold, 2000, pp. 311-312; Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 184; Nygren & Olstedal, 2015, p. 11). Nevertheless, the previous mentioned indifference can be considered as a manner of increasing the credibility of the obtained data through vignettes.

According to many researchers, gathering data about issues with high complexity and sensitivity is one of the strong features of the vignette technique, as we have previously mentioned (Al Sadi & Basit, 2017, p. 184; Jeffries & Maeder, 2004-2005, p. 17). That was crucial in our study and especially in the last vignette where the principals had to answer about two children may have been victims of domestic abuse. Actually, not only the respondents did not have reservations to answer the questions, but also a lot of them drew on similar situations or even mentioned their worries for the dangers posed to them, while handling similar incidents. On the contrary, in a direct question of the second phase about an incident having made them change their values in their professional domain some of the principals refused to respond. Although, negative feelings appeared on their faces accompanying their refusal and

as Bednarek-Gilland (2015, p. 17) stressed “emotions serve as indicators of values,” they did not want to answer. Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014, p. 428) and Finch (1987, p. 110) have attributed the benefit of acquiring with this technique data about complicated subjects to the fact that people are asked to respond to the stories by not directly being associated with them, as the principals encouraged first to talk about how they thought a principal in the Greek educational system should have behaved, and then about how they would have behaved by themselves.

Participants’ Evaluations of the Technique

Having been inspired by Hughes (1998, p. 390) and in order to reflect upon our implementation of the technique, we requested principals to express their impressions about the hypothetical stories at the end of each interview.

The participants found the process very interesting and enjoyable and the only referred drawback was that the vignettes were time-consuming. Indeed, the average duration of each interview was about an hour and a half, but the vignette technique took twice as much hour for the principals to respond than the direct questions of the second phase.

On the other hand, the most mentioned benefit of the stories was that the given situation served as a basis for answering. The principals advocated that the scenarios helped them to understand what exactly they were asked for. They also compared the open questions we used with closed ones in questionnaires, stressing that they were given enough space and time to express their opinions, although one said that we could have added more incidents. Apart from our participants’ preference of the qualitative using of vignettes, Wilks (2004, pp. 83-86) especially for the investigation of value orientations also favored the implementation of hypothetical scenarios in qualitative designs.

Another recurring benefit of vignettes in the participants’ opinions was that all the scenarios were based in reality that principals actually face in the Greek schools. A male principal replied enthusiastically: “And you know something... I liked it [the technique] much because everything that I read is things that I have faced at school. Everything” (participant 11).

Therefore, we confirm here that the closer to reality the stories are, the more appealing to respondents will be (Hughes & Huby, 2004, p. 40).

Moreover, Simon and Tierney (2011, p. 6) have added to the strengths of vignettes that “are episodes of learning in their own right.” Some of our participants also concluded that “the handling of these incidents was a good school” for them. Especially principal 10 said “It was a good practice and a type of learning and it had advantages because there are specific incidents, not vague, containing things that we face in our routine in schools.”

We think that the above conclusion is very crucial and has important implications, because vignettes can be implemented in action research and consequently, they can help more the principals in their work. Angelides and Gibbs (2004, pp. 112-119) incorporated vignettes into an action research design and proposed a variation of the technique in order for participants in the educational domain to be developed professionally. To their usage of the technique, “an inspector or an academic” observes the practice of a principal in the school environment and designs a vignette based on his/her observations. Then, the principal and the vignette’s constructor reflect on it. At the end of the process, the concluding description can be discussed either in a meeting with other principals or only by the academic/inspector and the principal being enmeshed, where ineffective or problematical issues are detected and adjustments to more effective ways of practice are proposed. Furthermore, an action research with the focus specifically on the analysis of values would lead to “conscious reflective intentional action” (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 113) for educational leaders.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the application of vignette technique for gathering qualitative research data. In our case, the hypothetical stories met our expectations and helped us obtain rich data about the school principals' value orientations in Greece, in an inoffensive manner. In summary, the findings suggested that vignettes strengthened the implementation of the semi-structured interviews, the participants felt relaxed and were eager to answer to the stories, mentioning their past experiences and present practices. The latter should not be indicative of their real actions but as a way of enhancing the credibility of the data gathered. These findings are added to a growing body of literature on our understanding of the vignette technique as a data collection tool.

Despite the benefits, some difficulties were observed that may discourage aspiring researchers from using vignettes. Firstly, after the conduct of the technique, researchers can end up with many pages of transcribed material, which they have to analyze and interpret, as Soydan (1996, p. 126) also pointed out. Moreover, the implementation of hypothetical scenarios takes considerable time not only for respondents to work with, but also for designers to construct them so as to ensure their credibility. But we consider that vignettes have a lot to offer to participants in the educational administration, especially if scenarios are implemented in an action-research-design.

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Appendix

Vignettes for planned (1-3) and for unplanned (4-6) problematical situations

1) Mr. Theodoros Petrou, the principal of a primary school with many teachers, has devolved upon the Vice principal of the school to create the schedule of the teachers who will supervise the children at each recess in the schoolyard. Mr. Petrou has requested the Vice-principal to create the schedule as equally and fairly as possible. But, due to the fact that there are many teachers working in the school, it is impossible the hours of supervision to be equally distributed. It happens, therefore, two educators having less experience to take on two more hours of supervision than the others.

When the schedule is discussed in the planned meeting of the Teacher Association, the teachers having been assigned with the more hours of supervision complain of injustice and bias. On the other hand, the older educators advocate that they should have fewer duties because they have many years of experience and are close to retirement. Then, the principal is asked to address the issue.

2) On December 22nd in a twelve-teacher primary school at the end of the first trimester, it has been scheduled the teachers to give the grades and also to inform the parents for their children academic progress. Mrs. Helen, a mother of a child, after having received the grades from the teacher, starts complaining intensely about the grades against the teacher. On the other hand, the educator answers to Mrs. Helen's arguments in a similar intense manner.

Consequently, there is a quarrel between the two and the caused commotion is perceived by the other educators and parents being at the school and by the principal, too.

3) George, a student in the fourth grade of a primary school, is very naughty from the beginning of the school year. He provokes many problems not only in the classroom, but also in the schoolyard. He is frequently involved in fights, shows aggressive behavior and speaks badly to the other children and the class teacher. Despite the fact that he has been many times to the principal's office, his behavior has not changed. Even, several parents have complained to both the class teacher and the principal about this child's behavior.

4) On the first Monday of February, four teachers in an elementary school have the duty

to supervise the children playing in the schoolyard during the recesses. At the recess with the longer duration and when the bell rings for getting the children for a lesson, three pupils call for the supervisors passing the main door of the school building, because a student has been injured and cannot stand up. The on-duty supervisors rush to the spot, call on an ambulance and one of them calls the principal.

The next day, the student's parents go to the principal's office, noting in an intense manner that the accident happened because of the apathy of the school and of the supervisors, who did not do their job properly. At the same time, the parents stress that their child has been hurt due to another kid of the same class, bullying for a long time their child. The parents continue that the above issue has not been addressed by either the class teacher or the principal himself. Finally, the parents threaten to denounce the fact to the higher educational authority.

5) In late October, an issue threatens students' safety of an eleven-teacher elementary school and agonizes Mr. Christou, the principal of this school. Every time the bell rings for students to go either to a class for a lesson or outside for a recess, overcrowding and minor accidents are observed occurring among the students. The fact that the school building is consisted of many floors and there are many stairs that students have to go up and down, creates many problems and increases the risk of more and more serious accidents.

For that reason, the school principal convenes an urgent meeting with the Teachers' Association where he reports the problem he has observed and his subsequent decision. Mr. Christou has decided at the end of each recess each teacher to gather his/her class in the yard and drive the students with safety to the classrooms. The same should happen when the students go out in the schoolyard. However, many teachers strongly resent for this change of their routine and they ask not to do it.

6) Mr. Nikolaou is the principal of a ten-teacher primary school. A morning of November one teacher, Mrs. Maria, during her vacant hour of teaching, goes to the principal's office to talk to him. Mr. Nikolaou accepts her and asks her about the reason of her visit. The upset teacher says that the visit is about two twin children attending her class.

She explains that she found last month that these children were highly introverted and showed out of focus during the lessons. Last week she noticed scratches on the girl's hand and bruises on the boy's face. When she asked the kids what had happened to them, they answered that they had been playing in the backyard of their home and had gotten injured. However, on last Friday Mrs. Maria observed again that the boy had difficulty walking and the girl had bruises on her hands. Mrs. Maria believes that the children are victims of domestic violence.

Questions after each vignette:

1. What should a school principal in the Greek educational system do in that case?
2. From your point of view, what is the most significant here?
3. What is preferable to happen for you and why?

Author Note

Pelagia A. Stravakou is an Assistant Professor in School Education (Pedagogy) at the Department of Primary Education at the Democritus University of Thrace, where she teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Her research interests mostly include teachers' training and further education, classroom management, school leadership, administration and evaluation, school effectiveness and school improvement. She is the author of several books and articles and presents at regional and national conferences. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Pelagia A. Stravakou, Department of Primary Education,

Democritus University of Thrace, Nea Chili Alexandroupolis GR68100, Greece; Phone: 00302551030095; E-mail: pstravak@eled.duth.gr.

Evangelia Ch. Lozgka is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of Primary Education at the Democritus University of Thrace. She earned a master's degree in School Education (Pedagogy and diversity in education) with a focus on school administration and leadership from the Democritus University of Thrace.

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